

'Perfecting' People, Poisoning Planet: The language of the sunbed tanning industry

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Introduction

As serious medical questions are now being asked of the sunbed industry regarding its effect on individual users, the hidden impact of the manufacture, use and disposal of sunbeds and their peripherals on the environment also needs to be considered. Given the costs incurred by sunbed users, the potential health risks, and the damage to the environment, the question arises of why people are increasingly making use of them. The answer may lie in the linguistic and visual techniques used by the sunbed industry to persuade, and some might say deceive, potential customers. This article investigates these techniques through analysis of a number of advertisements produced by the sunbed industry.

Cancer Research UK, on its website, reports that '83 per cent of sunbeds exceed EU safety guidelines on ultra violet radiation.'¹ Cancer Research is concerned with the **medical** repercussions of over powerful sunbeds, however the **environmental** impact of using more energy than is required also needs to be seriously addressed.

I will analyse texts and pictures from leaflets and Internet sources, within an ecolinguistic framework, in order to see how certain techniques encourage consumerism and potentially damage the environment and peoples' health.

Analysis

To begin with, it is important to point out that there is something misleading about the term 'sunbed' itself. The sun is a natural phenomenon that we associate with pleasant days spent outside, whereas the 'sunbeds' are artificial devices which could more accurately be described as 'ultra-violet radiation machines'. The discourse of the sunbed industry, as I will describe, does its best to perpetuate the idea that what is being offered is natural, equivalent to something we enjoy (spending time outside in the sun), and capable of delivering attractiveness which will lead to finding an ideal partner.

The following picture comes from one of two leaflets obtained from the Consol Tanning studio:

¹ Adfero, Cancer research. *Sunbed cancer risk almost triples*, site updated 30/01/2007, online <<http://info.cancerresearchuk.org/news/archive/newsarchive/2007/january/18047498>> date accessed: 08/01/08



This picture shows an attractive man and a woman with their arms around each other. They have an umbrella and the weather looks dull, however they both have a slight smile of satisfaction - perhaps boasting of their ability to have a tan despite the weather. A hidden implication, retrievable from the context of the advertisement, is that the couple were attracted to each other because of their suntans. The eye line vector from the eyes of the couple to the eye of the reader makes the couple interact directly with the reader - their eyes almost speak as if to say “we have a secret on how to look and feel good on a rainy day and get an attractive partner ... it is our tan - from a sunbed!” The level camera angle places the reader (with their presumed lack of tan and partner) right behind the attractive couple as if they are standing in the same scene.

The following table summarises the choice of phrase used in the two leaflets showing how they promote sunbeds as safe and healthy.

Leaflet 1: “Sun exposure good for human health”²

- ◆ Important source of vitamin D
- ◆ Protects against osteoporosis
- ◆ Fights inflammation
- ◆ Alleviate skin disorders
- ◆ Lowers glucose in blood- plays a role in preventing diabetes
- ◆ Correlation between lack of sunshine and increased blood pressure
- ◆ Help to prevent cancers of the breast, colon, prostate and ovaries, heart disease and multiple sclerosis
- ◆ Alleviate seasonal affective disorder. (Mood enhancer)
- ◆ Stimulates mood, body temperature and sex drive

This leaflet mentions nothing negative about the health effects of sunbeds and actually makes it look as though sunbeds provide protection against of all kinds of illness including cancer, heart disease and multiple sclerosis. It includes a lexical field drawn from authoritative medical science, for example: ‘Vitamin’, ‘Inflammation’, ‘Insulin’ and ‘Blood pressure’. A large number of positive terms are used to show that the orientation of the medical discourse is towards the positive health benefits of sunbeds, including ‘Growth’, ‘Repair’, ‘Strengthens’ and ‘Preventing’, ‘Protect’ and ‘Fight’.

² Consol Suncentre. *Sun exposure good for human health*, leaflet from Cheltenham Branch Nov 2007.

Leaflet 2: “Consol News” Vitamin D deficiency³

- ◆ Scientists warn over vitamin D deficiency
- ◆ Vitamin D is known as the sunshine vitamin
- ◆ Sunlight protects
- ◆ Moderate tanning is not only safe, it is beneficial to health
- ◆ New tubes still allow your skin to turn golden
- ◆ We want to make sure you tan safely
- ◆ Reduces the risk of cancer
- ◆ The summer has been a washout. Consol customers sought solace with a sunbed boost

This leaflet also has very little negative to say but it does reveal some situations when using a sunbed would not be advised. It is in the style of a newspaper, giving it connotations of being objective reporting rather than self-promotion. The front-page ‘news’ is about scientists warning of a vitamin D deficiency over the winter. It implies that using a sunbed is the medication needed to overcome this deficiency by stating: vitamin D is the ‘sunshine vitamin’. However, the World Health Organisation say this is not the case:

‘While sunbed use may increase vitamin D, for the majority of the population, incidental exposure to the sun, combined with normal dietary intake of vitamin D, provides adequate vitamin D’⁴. The lexical field of safety such as ‘protects’, ‘reduces the risks’ and ‘tan safely’ makes using a sunbed use seem safe.

The second piece of data is from Tamplins tanning studio website⁵ and includes a photograph and text:



This picture appears to be a misrepresentation of a sunbed salon experience, as the model is outside, under a blue sky, has the freedom of movement to sit up, has no eye protection and a

³ Consol Suncentre. *Consol News*, subheading: *Vitamin D deficiency*, leaflet from Cheltenham Branch Nov 2007.

⁴ World Health Organisation. *Sunbeds, tanning and UV exposure Fact sheet N°287*, subheading: *Health benefits*, text updated: March 2005, online <<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs287/en/>> date accessed: 08/01/08

⁵ Tamplins Tanning. *Professional tanning studios for men and women*, online <<http://www.tamplinstanning.com/>> date accessed: 08/01/08

blissful expression on her face. This is suggesting that sunbeds provide the equivalent sensually pleasant experience of sunbathing on a hot beach. At another level this picture has sexual connotations to it; the woman seems naked, her eyes are closed, she looks natural, glowing and sexy, and seems to be lying down giving herself up to the sunshine. Evidence that the sexual theme is deliberate comes from the phrasing of 'diary of a sunbed virgin' on the same page, as if using a sun-bed is equivalent to having sex. This is quite typical of many forms of advertising which show images of what people actually want (time outside in nature, being sexually attractive, feeling blissful, having sex) and then use those images to sell them something that will cost them money without providing any of the things depicted.

Another discourse that is drawn from is the discourse of discount sales 'Introductory half price tanning session', to make it seem as if the consumer is getting more for the same amount of money, giving them a buzz of saving money even as they (unnecessarily) spend it. In fact, the same advertisement suggests that it takes at least 5 sessions to get a tan, so 'half price' turns out to be ten percent of a whole course.

Within the discourse of the sunbed industry there are hidden assumptions. One phrase from the website underneath the tab 'vitamin D' is 'you need the light'⁶. This assumes that customers are suffering from a deficiency of light, and that the solution is through purchase of sunbed sessions rather than simply being outside more. It also states that sunlight helps us to 'live longer, healthier lives- something we all want!', which is true, but the hidden implication is that if you do not use a sunbed you will not be able to get enough light and will die prematurely. Rapport with the reader is created through presupposition ('something we all want' suggests that the writer knows all about what the reader wants) and pronoun use (inclusive 'we' shows that the writer considers the reader to be within the same group).

The term 'heliotherapy' is used which places sunbeds in the same category as other forms of therapy such as aromatherapy or psychotherapy without having to explicitly state (or prove) that the use of sunbeds has therapeutic value in any sense. Other terms such as 'dermatologists' 'chiropractic' and 'hyperbilirubinemia' somewhat randomly try to associate sunbeds with medicine and healing rather than skin damage or cancer.

When writing about their 'special offer' for first time users they use a lot of personal pronouns to get the reader directly involved i.e. 'to claim your half price tanning...' which suggests the tan is theirs already even though they have not claimed it yet. The phrase 'your unique offer' makes readers feel that the offer has been made especially and uniquely for them, which is flattering and encouraging.

A clear negative from an ecology point of view is the statement: 'we change our tanning lamps HALFWAY through their commercial life...' with emphasis placed on 'halfway'. The negative environmental effects of such waste were not considered; it is intended as a bonus for customers. This will be further explored under the heading 'sunbed disposal'.

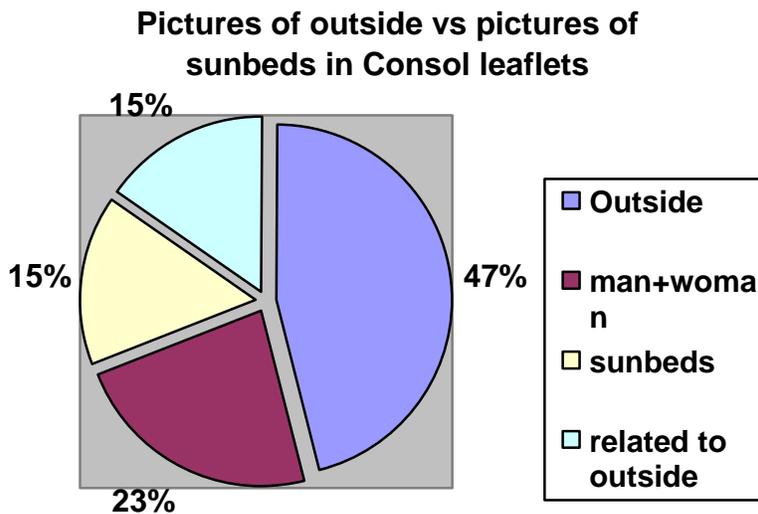
In summary, this language encourages people to indirectly harm the environment through the waste of energy in the production of sunbed equipment and the pollution created during their

⁶ Tamplins Tanning. *Professional tanning studios for men and women*, online <<http://www.tamplinstanning.com/>> date accessed: 08/01/08

⁷ Tamplins Tanning. *Professional tanning studios for men and women*, online <<http://www.tamplinstanning.com/>> date accessed: 08/01/08

disposal. The images of people outside in real sunlight show what people really want, but the advertising distracts them from it and towards something that they do not want or need but have to pay for anyway.

Pictures used in Tamplins and Consol are big and bright, with blue and yellow representing sky and sunshine. In the two Consol Suncentre leaflets combined there are ten pictures. Six pictures seem to have been taken outside, yet only two show the sunbeds themselves. Similarly, the Tamplins website shows a large picture of a tanned face with spectacular, snowy mountains as the backdrop. The prominent use of pictures of the environment is, however, misleading, since the reality of being shut in an electrical appliance is a lot less appealing. The natural environment is important for attracting customers, yet ironically sunbeds, through the energy and resources it takes to make the machines and their high energy consumption actually damage the environment.



Tanning bed technology is being developed rapidly with music, vibrations, air conditioning, aromas, special effect lighting and more. These encourage people to stay in the tanning booth longer. However, these additional features use more energy, require more manufacturing, and cause obsolete machines to be replaced faster – all contentious issues for those who care about global warming.

As an example, megaSun UK offer extras like ‘aquacool’, and ‘aroma cabin breeze’⁸. They claim their sunbeds stimulate ‘body, mind and soul’⁹. The referral to ‘soul’ has spiritual connotations and again the industry is tapping into what people really want in order to sell them something they do not need.

Environmental impacts of Sunbeds:

Manufacture: The manufacturing of all sunbeds requires energy- much of which comes from unrenewable sources such as coal and gas, the burning of which contributes to ‘greenhouse’ gas

⁸ MegaSun. *MegaSun 5600, technical data*, online <http://www.megasunuk.com/Technical/mS5600_engl.pdf>

⁹ MegaSun. *MegaSun tanning experience takes sunbeds to a new level*, online <<http://www.megasun-uk.com/>> date accessed: 08/01/08

emissions. Manufacturing acrylic shields for sunbeds ‘involves highly toxic substances which require careful storage, handling, and disposal. It also produces toxic fumes.’¹⁰

Sunbed use: The energy used just in powering the fluorescent lighting of larger sunbeds can be up to 12kw (60 lamps at 200 Watts.¹¹) This is 6 times more than a 2 bar electric fire (2 KW.) If the additional sunbed features are included, and salon heating and lighting costs included, the energy consumption would be higher.

Sunbed disposal: Sunbeds are classed as hazardous waste, making disposal a complicated process. The acrylic shields are not only an issue in manufacture but also in disposal:

‘It is considered a group 7 plastic among recycled plastics and is not collected for recycling in most communities. In a landfill, acrylic plastics are not readily biodegradable. Some acrylic plastics are highly flammable.’¹² A second hazardous element of a sunbed is the florescent tubes. Mercury used in this lighting (a toxic pollutant) is difficult to dispose of safely. If a florescent light is broken, put in a landfill or an incinerator then mercury is released into the environment: ‘The amount of mercury contained in just 25 standard fluorescent lamps can pollute an 8 hectare (20 acre) lake, making the fish in the lake unsafe for human consumption.’¹³

Conclusion

The language and pictures used by the sunbed industry promote health and beauty for individuals while carefully omitting any relationship between their manufacture, use and disposal and the environment. It is clear from the evidence that the sunbed industry is having a direct impact on the environment through its wasteful use of energy and use of toxic materials.

Images of people enjoying themselves in nature and the construction of sunbeds as providers of ‘therapy’ of benefit to ‘body and soul’ make the process of sitting naked in an electrical device resubbling a toaster appear to be a sensual and spiritual experience in itself. The use of health information couched in medical language makes subbeds appear to be positive contributors to health, while the use of beautiful young models and terms such as ‘beauty benchmark’ suggest that sunbeds contribute to beauty. On the other hand, the actual stance taken by the medical establishment is that sunbeds are of minimal health value, can pose a danger to health, and, ironically, can contribute to the premature aging of skin.

A false illusion of personal health and happiness is promoted over and above the health and happiness of the millions of people that are affected by increased environmental damage created by rich, over-consuming nations. As Cancer Research UK says on its website; ‘there is no such

¹⁰ Evelyn S. Dorman; Chris Cavette, The Gale Group, Inc. *How is acrylic plastic made?*, subheading: Subheading: *Toxic Materials, Safety Considerations, and Recycling*, 2002, online, <<http://www.answers.com/topic/acrylic-plastic?cat=technology>> date accessed: 08/01/08

¹¹ Wikipedia. *Tanning Bed*, text updated: 04/01/08 online<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunbed>> date accessed: 08/01/08

¹² Evelyn S. Dorman; Chris Cavette, The Gale Group, Inc. *How is acrylic plastic made?*, subheading: Subheading: *Toxic Materials, Safety Considerations, and Recycling*, 2002, online, <<http://www.answers.com/topic/acrylic-plastic?cat=technology>> date accessed: 08/01/08

¹³ Sick among the pure. *How do fluorescent and neon lights work?*, March 2005, online <<http://www.sickamongthepure.net/uvradiation/fluorescent.html>> date accessed: 08/01/08

thing as a safe tan'¹⁴. This is as true for the environment as it is for personal health when it comes to sunbeds.

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