

Original Paper

The Contrastive Study on Discursive Construction of Identities and the Adaptation in Cosmetic Advertising

Anqi Ye¹, Qian Li¹ & Mengchi Feng¹

¹ Anhui University, China

Received: May 6, 2024

Accepted: May 16, 2024

Online Published: May 24, 2024

doi:10.22158/eshs.v5n2p46

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eshs.v5n2p46>

Abstract

Discursive strategies are often used in cosmetic advertisements to construct different discursive identities in order to enter larger markets. Based on the graphic advertisements, the article reveals the dynamic selection and construction of discursive identities and their dynamic adaptation in the foundation advertisements of international brands and national brands. It is found that the cosmetic advertisements employ textual features to construct three discursive identities: one explicit identity for marketing purposes and two implicit identities: friend identity and expert identity. Based on the theories of discursive identity and linguistic adaptation, the article explores the dynamic discursive identities in this kind of advertisement discourse and analyzes the ways to dynamically adapt to the psychological, social and physical worlds of the discourse receivers.

Keywords

discursive identity, constructive process, cosmetic advertising language, adaptation

1. Introduction

The competition in cosmetic products market is becoming increasingly fierce where the new research and development of international brands and national brands emerge in endlessly and the promotion means become more and more iterative. There are various types of cosmetics advertisements and promotions, which play a key role in the rise of product sales. But the quality of cosmetic products is mixed, thus most consumers have developed a sense of vigilance and will not be gullible to believe the words in the advertisement. Based on this paradoxical attribute, cosmetic advertisements use multiple discourse strategies to construct different discursive identities and communicate effectively with consumers virtually, in order to adapt to the relevant communicative contexts and improve product promotion.

This paper selects the foundation advertisements of international brands such as Lancôme and Estee Lauder (hereinafter referred to as I1, I2 etc.), and national brands such as Florasis, Carslan, and Judydoll (hereinafter referred to as C1, C2, C3 etc.) as the research samples. The sales and reputation of these major brands of foundation have reached upper-middle level in the industry, and these brands are quite ingenious in advertising and marketing, therefore, this paper selects the foundation advertisements of the above brands as the research object.

2. Literature Review

Studies on identity construction from the perspective of pragmatics are mostly based on constructivism; Tracy (2002) argues that the relationship between discourse and identity construction is reciprocal, that identity influences the way people communicate, and that specific discourse practices can contribute to the construction of identity. Chen (2013), a domestic scholar, puts forward the concept of “discursive identity”, that is, the identity of the self or the other that the language user chooses consciously or unconsciously, and the identity of the social individual or group that the speaker or the author refers to in his/her discourse.

The Belgian linguist Verschueren (1999) put forward the theory of linguistic adaptation in his book *New Perspectives of Linguistics*, who believes that language use is actually a process of people making choices about language continuously. Linguistic adaptation involves four aspects: contextual adaptation, which refers to the various contextual factors to be taken into account in language choice; linguistic structural adaptation, which refers to the fact that adaptation involves various linguistic dimensions and principles of linguistic structure; the dynamics of adaptation, which refers to the ever-changing process of adaptation in the process of language choice and negotiation; and conscious salience of adaptation, which refers to the degree of consciousness of the communicators about language choice. The four aspects are interdependent and mutually constraining, but dynamics is the core of them.

Combined with the theory of linguistic adaptation, discursive identity is constructed dynamically through language, and also is dynamically adaptative. It is specifically manifested in the variability, negotiability and adaptability of discursive identity. According to the discourse types of identity construction proposed by Tracy (2002) and Chen (2018), cosmetic advertising discourse contains stylistic choices (formal or informal), lexical choices (e.g., salutation, jargon, abbreviation, or intonation), discourse content (e.g., topic, message, point of view, or presupposition), speech acts (e.g., criticizing, praising, suggesting, or announcing), epithets (hinting at the relationship of one's own or the other party's identity), and discourse practices such as phonological features (the use of rhythmic features to emphasize identity).

Currently, most studies view identity as a resource for doing or acting (Jiang Qingsheng, 2019), i.e., they examine how communicators construct specific identities to achieve specific communicative purposes, such as the dynamic selection and construction of consultant identity in business

conversations. For example, advertisers make dynamic choices and construct consultant identity in business conversation.

In the past, most research on cosmetic advertisements focus on the advertising strategies and language features, like Jiang (2006) and Zhou (2012), which stuck on the surface analysis of language. As research method expand, scholars start to analyze advertisements from the perspective of pragmatics. Li (2022) analyzed the cosmetic advertisements using Speech Act Theory. There are also other studies conducted through presuppositions and Cooperative Principles (Du, 2008; Li, 2021). At present, no scholars have conducted comparative studies on international and domestic cosmetic advertisements from the perspective of discursive identity. Seeing that, this study will do a contrastive study to explore discursive identities and dynamic adaptation in international and domestic cosmetic advertisements.

3. Research Design

In this paper, the graphic advertisements on the product pages of the official website are selected as the research object, ranging from the advertisements of international brands such as Lancôme, Estée Lauder, and NARS, to the advertisements of national brands such as Florasis, Carslan, and Judydoll. The textual content of the advertisements was extracted from the official product websites, removing irrelevant information such as pictures, characters, scenes, etc. and followed by manual proofreading to improve the accuracy. Since the text content is mostly incoherent statements, this paper focuses on qualitative analysis.

Research questions of this paper include:

- 1) What are the characteristics of the two types of brand advertisements at the text level? And what are the similarities and differences?
- 2) What discursive identities are constructed in the dynamic process of discourse practice in the two types of advertisements? And what are the similarities and differences?
- 3) How do these discursive identities adapt to communication in virtual contexts?

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Text Analysis

Commonality analysis of the two types of brand texts:

The sentiment analysis of the extracted texts reveals that positive emotions account for the majority of the corpus, followed by neutral emotions and very low proportion of negative emotions. Among them, the positive sentiment words praise the product more, focusing on words describing the effect and function of the product, such as “light”, “flawless” and “flattering”, so as to attract consumers. Neutral sentiment text mainly refers to quantitative and compositional words such as “ten years of scientific research”, “70% of skin-care essence ingredients” and “hyaluronic acid”, which accurately conveys the relevant information about the product. The advertising language deliberately avoids the use of

negative words in order to frame the content of the product.

According to the high-frequency words and sentiment analysis, keywords can be categorized into product efficacy, ingredients, applicable groups and other categories. Among them, product efficacy vocabulary are all positive words, focusing on the durability of the product and the lightness and flawlessness of the makeup effect, which are all the effects that consumers are looking for; ingredient vocabulary mainly belongs to the field of science and technology, especially the brand's patented results, which emphasizes the professionalism of the product; applicable population vocabulary use a lot of positive words, creating a unique symbolic value of the product, which conveys the idea of "consumption of things equal to you!".

The author also found that there are two tendencies in the use of negative words in the advertisements of the two types of brand foundations. One is the tendency to use a combination of negative words and negative emotional words to emphasize the high quality of the product, for example, "no fake face", "no make-up removal" and "no dullness". The other is to ask a question that presupposes that the consumer has had a lot of negative problems with their previous foundations, and then to introduce their own product, thus creating the impression that their product can solve these negative problems.

Personality analysis of the texts of the two types of brands:

The two types of brands have coincided with their emphasis on product ingredients, functions and effects, but they are also different. Most of the big international brands have a long history and rich brand culture, so they emphasize the historical nature of their brands in their advertising campaigns. A lot of historical vocabulary is used in their advertising text, mainly through the use of quantitative words to emphasize the specialty of the brand in the field of foundations and the brand's own value.

Local affordable brands, on the other hand, make more frequent use of words that express the concept of "innovation", as well as quantifiers that demonstrate sales volume. Among them, innovation words are mainly used to describe scientific and technological terms to demonstrate the product's technological strength and give consumers an impression of reliability. The extensive use of quantitative words highlights the product's considerable sales volume and creates the impression that the product is suitable for the general public.

Taken together, the two types of advertising texts are basically the same in terms of product efficacy, ingredients, description of the applicable population and vocabulary selection, but the international brands highlight historical vocabulary to emphasize the brand's own historical value. Local affordable brands, on the other hand, will highlight product sales and innovative ingredients, demonstrating the continuous innovation and unstoppable power of emerging brands.

4.2 The Analysis of Pragmatic Identities in Foundation Advertisements

4.2.1 Commonality Analysis of Two Types of Brand Identity Construction

Explicit identity of professional salesman and consultant:

The core identity constructed in the advertising discourse, i.e., the salesman identity, is aimed at

exploring people's consumption needs. Salespeople need to provide as much professional information and usage of products as possible and make personalized recommendations to consumers in order to boost product sales.

E1: I1: 十年科研（色彩捕捉技术），专研科技（贴皮持妆网）

C2: DEEP-BOMB 黑科技，升级高倍保湿，干皮赋活

I4: 后台御用无暇上妆手法（第一步.....第二步.....）

C3: 彩妆师建议上妆手法.....

I1: Ten years of scientific research (color capture technology), specializing in science and technology (skin-attached lasting makeup membrane)

C2: DEEP-BOMB black technology, upgraded high-fold moisturizing, dry skin empowerment

I4: Flawless makeup techniques exclusively used backstage (first step ... second step ...)

C3: Makeup-wearing techniques suggested by makeup artist...

Example 1 uses jargons in the field of science and technology and integrates different languages to show its own expert status and the professionalism of the product. Through the speech act of instruction on the product technology and product usage in detail, consumers can have a more thorough understanding of the product quality and other information, and psychologically expect the effect on themselves, which can stimulate the consumer's desire to buy.

In addition to providing basic information about the product, professional salesman also deliberately emphasizes the unique selling points of their products, so as to highlight the special features of their products, and then attract customers to consume, as demonstrated in the Example 2.

E2: I1: 专为亚洲肌肤定制

I2: 专利吸油不拔干

I3: 专研“持妆透气网膜”，一抹三效

I1: Customized for Asian skin

I2: Patented oil-absorbing, non-drying

I3: Specialized in “long-lasting breathable membrane”, three effects with one apply

When selling a product, professional salesman will recommend complementary products of the same brand, with the title of “perfect partner for makeup”, or in the capacity of a consultant, giving consumers advice to achieve the advertised “perfect” effect.

E3: I1: 四步解锁完美底妆

I2: 持妆粉底液“星搭档”总有一套适合你

C3: 王牌持妆家族（妆前乳，粉底液和蜜粉）

I1: Four steps to unlock the perfect base makeup

I2: Makeup-holding foundation “Star Partners” always have a set that suits you.

C3: Ace Makeup Holding Family (Pre-makeup Lotion, Foundation & Powder)

One of the duties, or purposes, of salesman is to increase the sales of a product. Using the speech act of suggesting a specific product while recommending other products of the same brand is a common way to increase sales, and this is also true in the virtual context of one-way conversations.

Implicit identity of scientific and technical expert:

Expert identity is used to explain certain specialized knowledge in cosmetic advertisements, and strong emotional discourse, first and second person pronouns, abbreviated forms, slang, and colloquialisms are less frequently used in expert discourse. Expert identity gives authority to the information in the advertisements and allows consumers to better understand the value of the product.

E4: I2: 天然植萃, 协同3大抗氧精华同源成分, 水飞蓟精粹+维E+维C酯

I3: 液态空气膜, 低密度、高吸附分子结构, 长久持妆, 肌肤无压力

C1: 三重粉体分散技术, 有效改善毛孔型积粉

I2: Natural plant extracts, synergized with 3 major antioxidant essence homologous ingredients, silymarin essence + Vitamin E + Vitamin C esters

I3: Liquid air film, low density, high adsorption molecular structure, long-lasting, skin-free makeup

C1: triple powder dispersion technology, effectively improve the pore-type powder accumulation

In Example 4, a lot of scientific and technical terms are used to present the ingredients of the product, avoiding the use of emotional terms. Each scientific and technological terminology is immediately followed by a function supplemented by an explanation, and this presentation not only strengthens the identity of the expert in the advertisement, but also highlights the advantages of the product, and enhances the consumer's trust in the product and their desire to buy it.

E5: I1: 32种精粹凝蕴, 上妆即护肤。

C2: 24H高倍保湿, 品牌保湿专利

I3: 精华养肤, 6重精粹加持, 0有害添加

G3: 国货草本养肤, 添加山茶花、野生积雪草、北极维生素

I1: 32 kinds of essence condensation, Makeup as Skin Care.

C2: 24H high moisturizing, with branded moisturizing patent

I3: Essence nourishing skin, with 6 essence supplements and 0 harmful additives

G3: National herbal skin care, adding camellia, wild Centella asiatica, arctic vitamins

The introduction of skin care function in Example 5 seeks a balance between maintaining the basic function of foundation products and pursuing skin care value. In addition to the brand effect and quality assurance, the skin care function of foundation products is incorporated into consumer demand. The development of the times has given multiple meanings to foundation products, and consumers pay more attention to improving the quality of life.

The rhetorical technique repetition has been used in the promotion of skin nourishing ingredients, which gives consumers visual stimulation and increase the impression of the skin nourishing

characteristics of the product. The introduction of the topic of skin care will enhance consumer recognition of the effect of the product to the recognition of the value of skin care, to make up for the harm of cosmetics on the skin.

4.2.2 Personality Analysis of Identity Construction of Two Types of Brands

The implicit friend identity in the advertisements of international big brands:

One of the strategies of advertising is to establish a close relationship with consumers, to bring them closer so as to complete the product introduction, and this is also true for cosmetic advertisements. The products of big international brands are usually expensive and above the consumption level of normal people. It is difficult to make consumers desire to consume by only providing specific data and objective information, but building the identity of consumers' friends through words can narrow the psychological distance between the two.

E6: I1: “还在寻找夏日底妆天菜?”

I2: “想要获得干净服帖的底妆吗?”

I1: “Still looking for a top summer makeup foundation?”

I2: “Want to get a clean and flattering foundation?”

Example 6 brings the consumer closer by asking questions that portray a friend who understands the consumer's needs. The daily conversation creates an environment to communicate with the consumer, providing reasons for purchase. At the same time, the discursive strategy of asking questions about past makeup problems plus launching their own products evokes curiosity and creates the impression that their own product can solve consumers' problems. With intimate interpersonal relationships and multiple discursive practices, the sincerity of the advertisement is greatly enhanced, and the consumers' willingness to buy is greatly increased despite the unpopular prices of the international brands.

The identity of fashion and culture experts of international brands and the identity of oriental culture experts of national brands:

Cosmetic brands are inextricably linked to fashion and culture, so in their advertising campaigns, brands will emphasize their fashion attributes or cultural load. I found that international brands have been established for a long time, and have long been deeply rooted in the fashion industry, so they will emphasize their own fashion attributes, and use vocabulary and discourse strategies to build their own identity as experts in fashion and culture. On the other hand, because of their relatively brief brand history, national brands will emphasize more on Chinese cultural factors to build their identity as experts in oriental culture.

E7: I1: (品牌名)底妆世家,10 年科研, 专研色彩捕捉技术

I2: 品牌创始于 1994 年, 是法国彩妆大师缔造的美国彩妆艺术品牌。

I3: 品牌故事 (因专业而秀, 为后台而生)。品牌所缔造的是审美盛宴, 纽约、伦敦、米兰、巴黎、上海每季 100 场顶级大秀, 240 位后台彩妆师, 2000 款妆容, 领衔全球趋势, 锻造专业标杆。

I1: (brand name) base makeup family, 10 years of scientific research, specializing in color capture technology

I2: Founded in 1994, the brand was is a French makeup master created by the American makeup art brand.

I3: Brand story (Show for the Professionalism and Live for the Backstage). What the brand has created is an aesthetic feast, with 100 top shows in New York, London, Milan, Paris and Shanghai every season, 240 backstage makeup artists, and 2,000 makeup looks, leading global trends and forging professional benchmarks.

Example 7 constructs the identity of an expert in promoting the company's fashion culture through the discursive practice of narrative. Third-person pronouns are chosen in the corpus to ensure the truthfulness and objectivity of the knowledge, and the comprehensive introduction of the brand story popularizes the fashion culture and added value of the collection to consumers. Expressions like "Makeup master" and "top show" build a high-end consumption context. The advertisements are supplemented with pictures of models and celebrity spokespersons, setting the tone of the product as fashionable and premium.

E8: C1: 国货草本养肤，含珍稀100%野生积雪草。

C2: 以“鼻烟壶”之形，承东方之韵，数百年前的东方风尚，流行至今。

C2: 取形自小轩窗，取色自粉与黛。

C1: Chinese herbal skin care, containing rare 100% wild Centella asiatica.

C2: In the shape of a "snuff bottle", bearing the charm of the Orient, the Oriental fashion of hundreds of years ago, popular to this day.

C2: Taking the shape from the small window, taking the color from the pink and dai.

The constant reference to Chinese elements in Example 8 reinforces the domestic identity of the brand. Unique Chinese elements such as "herbal", "powder" and "snuff bottle" add oriental charm to the brand and enhance the psychological convergence of domestic consumers.

Constantly innovating researcher identity of national brands:

E9: C1: 革新 OIL-BEAT 专利，进阶控油力，平衡好肤感

C2: 93.55%消费者认同妆面服帖，93.55%消费者认为不拔干，93.55%消费者认为持色不暗沉

C3: 本产品页面如宣称保湿、控油、舒缓等类似表述，均为经过消费者使用测试得出的结论。

C1: Innovative OIL-BEAT patent, advanced oil-control power, balanced skin feeling

C2: 93.55% of consumers agree that the makeup fits well, 93.55% of consumers believe that it is not drying out, and 93.55% of consumers believe that it's long-lasting without dullness.

C3: Any claims of moisturizing, oil-control, soothing, etc. on this product page are the conclusions reached after consumer use testing.

In Example 9, the promotion of Chinese products constantly presents concepts such as the latest research and development, innovative technologies, etc., emphasizing the differences and advantages

over previous versions. At the same time, specific data of consumer feedback are presented in the advertising campaigns, which is the most intuitive guarantee of product effectiveness in the virtual context. With the combination of constantly upgraded technology and consumer feedback data, consumers' trust in new domestic products rises sharply, and product sales can also rise.

4.3 The Adaptation Analysis of Discursive Identity

Discourse identities in cosmetics advertisement discourse change dynamically, switching between different discourse identities in the same communication. The choice of discursive identity needs to go through negotiations, and the process is not only governed by the linguistic context, but also influenced by the non-linguistic context. Verschueren (1999) believes that the communicative context belongs to the non-linguistic context, which includes the language user, the physical world, the social world and the psychological world.

The salesman identity conforms to the physical world, and the language choice involves temporal and spatial factors, such as time indicators ("Founded in 1994" and "10 years of scientific research") to objectively confirm the historical value of the brand and the history of craftsmanship heritage. The advertising slogan of "Show for the Professionalism and Live for the Backstage" applies the influence of spatial distance on communication, breaks through the limitation of space with exaggeration, creates the image that the effect of foundation is enough to go on the professional show. The brand's cultural confidence and confidence in the product are shown to the recipients of the discourse, thus arousing consumers' expectation of the product and desire to buy.

In the social world, there are many social factors that require language to comply, and the process of compliance is more dynamic and complex. The construction of friend identity imposes certain constraints on verbal behavior, thus shortening the social distance between participants (Li, 2022). There is an asymmetry in information reception between advertisers and consumers, thus requiring certain discourse strategies to achieve a balance in the discursive relationship. Consumers, being exposed to unknown products, need to have knowledge of their basic information and advantages before making a purchase choice. Therefore, the advertisement text needs to explain the advantages and ingredients of the product in detail as a professional salesman and technician in order to emphasize the value of the product and enhance the consumer's desire to buy. There is also a certain distance between advertisers and consumers, especially between ordinary consumers and international brands, so it is necessary to adopt a certain discourse strategy to narrow the psychological distance between the two sides. The text uses the question "Still looking for...?" to shorten the social distance between the two parties and create an intimate social environment. From the perspective of a friend's identity, the advertiser makes a recommendation based on an image of understanding the consumer's needs, thus generating an effective sales pitch.

The psychological world usually involves the communicator's mental state, including emotions, desires and motives. In advertisement discourse, the adaptation of discursive identity to the psychological

world mainly focuses on emotional and face pandering, and the influence of the listener's psychological state on discourse comprehension is particularly obvious. Example 7 emphasizes that the product is used in the "top show" held in the big cities of each country, and the identity of the product designer is the "makeup master", which not only highlights the professionalism of the product itself, but also creates an impression of "high-end people use high-end products".

5. Conclusion

Combining the theory of discursive identity and linguistic adaptation, this paper finds through qualitative analysis that there are similarities and differences in the discourse identity construction of foundation advertisements of international big brands and national brands. The two types of brand advertisements dynamically construct the same explicit salesman identity and implicit scientific and technological expert identity with the help of textual features. But the international brands also construct implicit friend identity and fashion culture expert identity, while the national brands construct oriental culture expert identity and constantly innovating researcher identity. The salesman identity tries to provide information about the value of goods, thus conforming to the physical world; the friend identity's conformity to the social world is reflected in the discursive balance between the speaker and the listener, providing consumers with pertinent advice; and the expert identity dynamically conforms to the psychological world in the communicative context, catering to the psychological needs of consumers (status identity, cultural identity, or the pursuit of better results).

References

- Chen, X. R. (2013). Pragmatic Identity: Dynamic Choice and Discursive Construction. *Foreign Languages Research*, (04), 27-32, 112.
- Chen, X. R. (2018). *Pragmatic Identity: How to Do Things with Worlds of Identity*. Beijing Normal University Publishing Group, Beijing.
- Du, X. L. (2008). *Analysis of Pragmatic Presupposition in Cosmetic Advertising*. Guangxi Normal University, MA thesis.
- Jiang, X. J. (2006). Discussion on Cosmetics Advertising Strategy *Market Modernization*, (26), 120-121.
- Jiang, X. J. (2019). Studies of Pragmatic Identity in the Last Decade: Five Theoretical Approaches and Methodologies. *Journal of Fujian Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, (01), 57-63, 169.
- Li, C. H. (2022). Discursive Identity Construction and Conformity in Alcohol Advertising Discourse. *Voice & Screen World*, (19), 90-92.
- Li, L. C. (2021). Analysis of Cosmetic Advertising Slogans Based on Cooperation Principle. *Journal of News Research*, (04), 243-244.

- Li, N. N. (2022). *A Study on the Chinese Cosmetic Advertisement in the perspective of Speech Act*. Shaanxi University of Technology, MA thesis.
- Tracy, K. (2002). *Everyday Talk: Building and Reflecting Identities*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Verschueren, J., & He, Z. R. (1999). *Understanding Pragmatics*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing.
- Zhou, L. (2012). *A Study on Cosmetic Advertising Language Characteristics*. Anhui University, MA thesis.