Beauty in Language:

Deciphering the Linguistic and Psychological Codes

in Cosmetic Advertisements

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Introduction

Cosmetics commercials have been emphasizing the concept of 'Flawless Beauty,' which can be associated with the psychological term 'perfectionism.' Perfectionist individuals tend to set high standards for social performance and place a strong emphasis on being impeccable, in which perfectionism is one of the major causes of Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), a psychological condition characterized by intense and persistent fear or anxiety in social situations (Wang et al., 2022). SAD can significantly lead to various emotional and interpersonal challenges, or in other words, damaging one's self-value and self-esteem. Self-esteem is the assessment of one's own inherent value developed for the individual to exceed important goals. Moreover, it was discovered that 80% of SAD patients do not get proper treatments (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health UK, 2013). In this case, what would be a proper treatment for SAD patients in the sphere of "Social Appearance Anxiety"? Specifically, what method could lead to a reduction in stress and a construction in self-esteem based on appearance?

Also, derived from perfectionism, the concept of 'ideal beauty' in cosmetics advertisements often encompasses attributes such as the beauty of skin tones, the beauty of complexion, the beauty of character, and the beauty of expression (Walker, 1852, p.152). Furthermore, Walker (1852) mentioned that all cosmetics, skin care products, and perfumes all serve the purpose of satisfying oneself and harmonizing the balance (p.152). Therefore, this essay seeks to define the correlation between inner and appearance beauty in cosmetics commercials and seeks better ways of advertising cosmetic slogans that help SAD patients.

This study includes three research questions:

1. What are the expressions of 'beauty' inherent in Taiwanese cosmetics commercials?
2. Looking into Taiwanese cosmetics commercials, what concepts of self-values are incorporated?
3. How are cosmetic commercials reflecting the prominent issue of SAD?

Literature Review

Generally speaking, most research seek into the relationship between brand slogans and purchase intention but discusses the psychological impact of the slogans on consumers only on the surface level. For instance, Greenfield (2018) has discovered the negative impacts of cosmetic commercials on consumers' mental health, and specifically on females' self-esteem (p.6). Through survey statistics, Kwan and others (2019) have discovered a correlation between cosmetic

commercials and women's self-esteem, claiming that social comparison from cosmetic advertisements leads to a lack of self-esteem regarding appearance (p.266). Furthermore, Gajmer (2021) suggests that attractive cosmetics advertisement ideology has resulted in enhanced anxiety about public appearance in society (p.64). In fact, this following essay not only evaluates how cosmetic slogans shape objective criteria of 'beauty', but also seeks in depth how cosmetic slogans may or may not echo SAD, build an individual's self-values, and appeal to basic psychological needs.

Bai's (2018) examination of cosmetic advertisement language reveals several key insights into its composition (p.841). Adjectives play an indispensable role and dominating their content– the function of the product. Both action-oriented verbs and noun phrases featuring multiple modifiers, capture audiences' attention and facilitate brand promotion. Furthermore, metaphor is largely implied in advertisements, conveying more than the literal meaning, and also an unseen authoritative source. Therefore, in order to discover the intended reference of cosmetic advertisements, metaphorical devices will be the major focus explored in the following research.

Since consumer products are predominantly promoted based on their ability to aid self-realization and self-improvement, Kilyeni (2012) claims that slogans encourage buyers both explicitly or implicitly to become better in their identity through appealing identity for a better self (p.29). However, the article applies to how cosmetics advertisements appeal to the sign of beauty but does not provide an interpretation of the impact on consumers' psychological health.

Based on the survey results, Daszkiewicz (2022) claims the campaigns prominently feature empowerment messages, urging the audience to embrace feelings of confidence, beauty, and value (p.113). Furthermore, based on consumer expectations of self-esteem and self-acceptance that should be supported in cosmetic commercials, Daszkiewicz (2022) suggests ethnic diversity and personal development ranking the highest (p.121). While focusing on the consumer psychology of cosmetic commercials, the study leaves out an analysis of the word types, which will be further elaborated in this following research.

Research Methodology

Data Collection: A total of 1000 cosmetic slogans (16,011 Chinese characters) based on capturing images of promotion flyers within department and retail stores in Taiwan are collected from 1st July to 4th September 2023. Since the aim is to investigate corpus based on cosmetic

commercials in Taiwan, a balanced data of 500 data each from high-end brands and drugstore brands will be collected. High-end brands collected are from the top 5 department stores in Taiwan; drugstore brands collected are from the top 3 retail stores in Taiwan.

Preprocessing: Manual data cleaning includes the removal of non-Chinese characters and data consisting only of the product name, which will be considered invalid.

Data Classification: There will be 4 labels set for the corpus to be categorized, 1) 'How' to use the product, 2) 'Physical appearance' of the user (outer function), 3) Reference to 'inner function' (not objective criterias, but subjective impressions), and 4) Metaphorical Devices of the product. Slogans can fall under more than one category, as long as the slogan consists of more than one purpose.

Analysis of Sentence Structure: Based on the labeled slogans 'inner function' (subjective impression), the specific word usage will first be marked, and second be classified to their corresponding part of speech. The top 3 frequent uses of adjectives, verbs, nouns, and adverbs (if any) will be sorted into a table and independently analyzed through context meaning. For both high end & drugstore brands, specific references to "people" will be individually analyzed.

Analysis of Metaphorical Device: Based on the labeled slogans 'Metaphorical Devices', the object of the metaphor will be marked. Then, analysis will be made on these marked words based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (first the 5 levels from the pyramid, then the specific examples from the indicated level). Examples from each level will be listed with translation into English, analysis of the depicted image of the metaphor, and how the example links to the indicated level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

**Figure 1:** Process Diagram of the Research Methodology

Data Analysis and Results

Looking into the distribution of 'Physical Appearance,' 'Inner Value,' and 'Product Image' in Figure 2, it can be concluded that drugstore brands tend to focus more on promoting product usage and its impact on consumers' physical appearance. Drugstore brands also make greater use

of metaphorical devices in slogans compared to high-end brands. In contrast, high-end brands are more inclined to emphasize the inner effects on consumers after they purchase the product.

Figure 2: Slogan Content Distribution for High-End Brands and Drugstore Brands
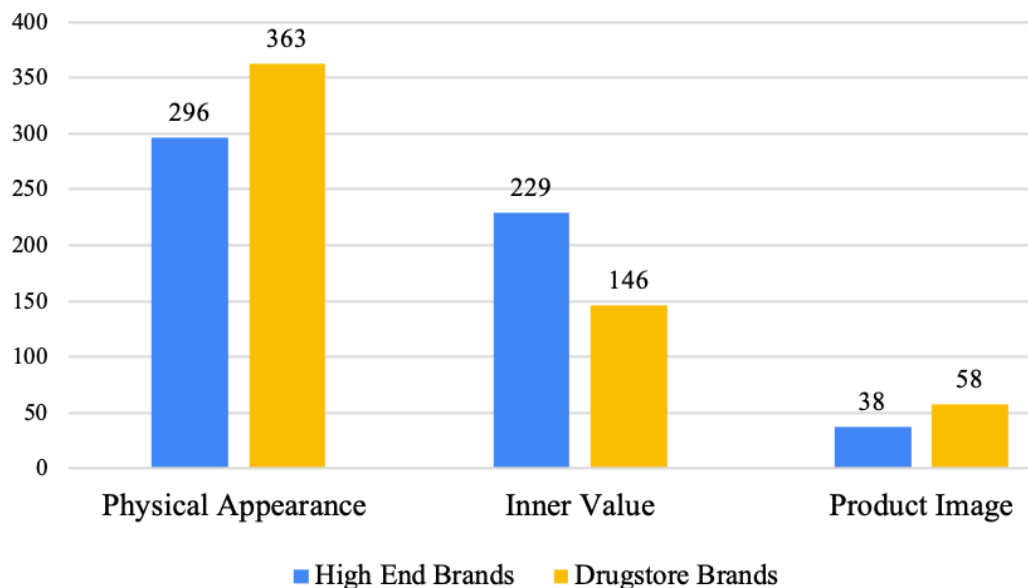
Next, based on the data consisting of 1000 cosmetic commercial slogans, an interpretation and analysis of word frequency of empathetic feelings towards self-concept is made. "完美" (perfect), "自然"(natural), and "綻放"(bloom) appear as the most frequent words from the 'Inner Value' data.

Table 1: Words consisting of inner value and their indicated frequency (F)

Adjectives	F	Verbs	F	Nouns	F	Adverbs	F
完美 (perfect)	54	綻放 (bloom)	20	美麗 (beauty)	15	由內而外 (from within)	5
自然 (natural)	28	閃耀 (shine)	9	好氣色 (fresh/healthy)	10		
優雅 (elegant)	11	展現 (present)	8	光彩 (brilliance)	9		

The high frequency of the adjective "完美" (perfect) calls to 'perfectionism' mentioned in the introduction, echoing to SAD issue in cosmetics

commercials. Furthermore, another noticeable trend is how cosmetics commercials put an emphasis on the idea of "glow", including"耀眼" (dazzling), "閃耀" (glimmer), "光彩" (brilliance). This shows a possible trend in the spiritual need of 'standing out'.

When cosmetic commercials allude to inner functions, one noticeable phenomenon is the implicit reference to a 'person' in the noun phrase. The slogan only mentions 'someone', but often conveys an image way beyond, which consumers relate themselves to that specific person.

Drugstore Brands: "台韓女神愛用 13 年！" "Taiwanese and Korean beauty goddesses's beloved for 13 years!" This is a slogan example from the drugstore brand Bio Essence, which specifically, '台韓女神' 'Taiwanese and Korean beauty goddesses' is the person in reference. Referring to a goddess figure creates the image of a flawless, desired, admired person, allowing customers to simulate themselves as the character, from admiring to being the desired perfection.

High-End Brands: "獻給大膽無畏、自由獨立的女性。" "Dedicated to fearless, independent females." This is a slogan example from the high-end brand CHANEL. The person referred to in the slogan is '女性' 'female'. The slogan makes reference to females, echoes female customers, and calls for the desire for feminine beauty.

For drugstore brands, a goddess figure is used as a reference, reflecting the desires that the commercial advertisements believe their product can fulfill. In contrast, high-end brands predominantly reference the 'female' figure. However, unlike drugstore brands, the 'person' referred to in high-end brand noun phrases is an undefined character simply described as 'female.' This portrayal carries a different, more elevated connotation than 'goddess,' emphasizing the prestige associated with the word 'female' itself.

Figure 3: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Mcleod, 2023)

In *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs comprises a theory of human motivations and clarifies the definition of each level from the 5-tier pyramid model: Physiological needs, safety needs, sense of belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization shape the five-stage model.

Figure 4: Product image and Marslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Product Image and Marslow's Hierarchy of Needs
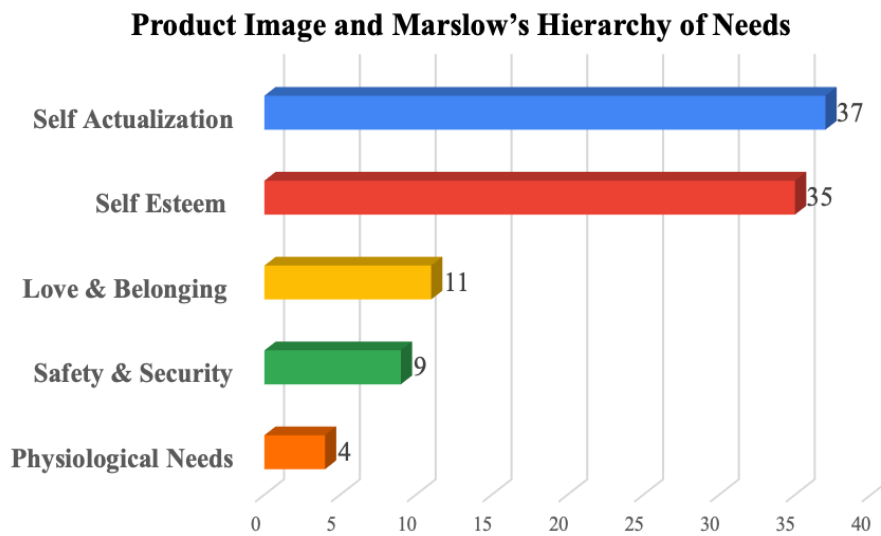
The second analysis stage of this study uses the theory from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to further interpret how metaphorical devices echo it.

Level 1 Physiological Needs & Level 2 Safety and Security:

Level 1 is the basic, prior requirements for human survival, while **Level 2** is when people request predictability and to be in control, including health and emotional security. (Maslow, 1943)

In a slogan of a drugstore brand, Banana Boat, "全家人的防曬保護傘美國人 NO.1 防曬品牌", sunscreen is in reference to the metaphorical description of "保護傘" "Protective Umbrella". From the slogan, it can be inferred how the need is echoing the realization of a need for 'shelter', calling customer desires for physiological needs.

In a slogan of a drugstore brand, Maybelline, "救星！會呼吸的控油粉底", foundation is referred to as a 'salvation' for consumers. The metaphorical reference to 'salvation' creates a sense of emotional security for consumers, promising to resolve the anxiety. By providing solutions to solve skin problems, the slogan satisfies consumer needs for safety and security.

Level 3 - Love & Belonging: The level at which human emotional needs require intrapersonal needs, affiliating, and connectedness. This slogan from the drugstore brand, NICKA.K"走在紐約的時尚尖端" refers to the outstanding fashion performance of a lipstick. Not explicitly mentioned within the context, but the lipstick is in reference to "the cutting edge of New York". The reference presents the relation of how fashion is a desirable want & aim, demonstrating a sense of connectedness that is strongly related to fear of missing out, which the slogan satisfies the third level of needs of consumers, Love and Belonging.

Level 4 - Self-Esteem: The fourth level of needs, Self-esteem, is classified into two types, respect from others and esteem for oneself.

　　"一見棕情 勾勒會說話的眼神" is a slogan from the drugstore brand, KISSME, presenting the function of an eyeliner, outlining a pair of eyes that can communicate better. 'The speaking gaze' falls into the category of respect from others as it accomplishes the function of eye contact communication elevated to a different level. In fact, it does not show an obvious 'esteem for self', but only a desire for respect from others.

Level 5 - Self Actualization: The highest level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Self-Actualization, refers to three major categories: the realization of one's self-fulfillment, seeking of potential, inner growth, and emphasis on peaking experiences.

　　"自由層疊配搭，打造出最能展現自我本質的香氣" is a slogan from the high-end brand, Jo Malone, using the metaphor referring fragrance to 'self-essence'. The metaphor directly refers to the sense of 'self', which displays the importance of self-satisfying own needs. The eventual pursuit of fragrance is the scent of self-essence, which advertisements portray the ideal of everyone to be capable of performing oneself. 'Self-essence', demonstrating self-fulfillment, presents the human need for Self-Actualization, and constructing oneself through the capability of performing oneself.

　　"將夕陽落日的美景映於雙唇之上" is a slogan from the high-end brand, TOM FORD. Lipstick is in reference to the beautiful scenery of the sunset, purposefully depicting a vivid image of scenery. The emphasis on 'experience purpose' conveys the message to 'enjoy the view' instead of a direct call of 'buying the product'. The portrayal of scenery falls under the category of experience purpose under self-actualization, fulfilling desires of self-actualization through attaining a pleasant experience when using this product.

Conclusion and Suggestions

　　Taiwanese cosmetics commercials, from 1st July to 4th September 2023, use physical appearance, inner value, and product image to create a 'perfect look' in advertisements. Differing from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the results of this experiment show how self-actualization is the most frequently appealed through metaphorical devices, with physiological needs the least. This result shapes an inverted pyramid opposite to Maslow's pyramid, presenting how cosmetics

commercials prioritize self-actualization in slogans instead of physiological needs, calling on consumers to realize their potential and fulfill them through purchasing the cosmetic product.

Excessive fixation on achieving 'perfectionism' in the modern cosmetic industry, prioritizing an idealized beauty that contributes to the development of SAD. This relentless pursuit of flawless beauty standards leads individuals to feel intense pressure to conform, resulting in increasing self-consciousness and anxiety in social situations. As the cosmetic industry plays a significant role in shaping societal beauty ideals, it becomes crucial to consider its impact on mental health and self-esteem, with an emphasis on promoting a more balanced perspective on beauty.

Laham (2020) questions "Is advertising guilty for reinforcing an existing stereotype?" (p.80). The answer would be no. Words itself does not carry emotions. Then, are the customers themselves the ones to blame for SAD? No, definitely not. Instead of finding a scapegoat to blame for the SAD issue in today's society, the focus is to seek how to strengthen and stabilize individuals' self-esteem.

Then, what is the breakthrough? The first step to stopping the vicious cycle of SAD is to learn how to love yourself as who you are. Define your identity both externally and internally. Recalling in Graph 1, an unbalanced amount of slogans is seen among physical appearance, inner value, high-end brands, and drugstore brands. However, beauty is a term referring to both the inner and outer self, which cannot be viewed separately when mentioning oneself. Furthermore, if cosmetics commercials seek to convey both external and internal messages of self, then it should specify how to discover a true identity of outer and inner self instead of just an unattainable 'ideal' image. For example, instead of only mentioning "完美" "perfect" that appeals only to the inner self, adding "水潤" "hydrated" in the slogans to combine both, forming "完美且水潤" "perfect and hydrated", will allow customers to attain a sense on both an inner function elevation and an outer function achievement.

Therefore, the breakthrough for SAD in the cosmetics industry, both high-end brands and drugstore brands, is to aim for balancing the proportion of physical appearance vs. inner value slogans, assisting SAD patients when exposed to cosmetics commercials to better find their way towards self-esteem. In the end, a piece of advice to anyone reading this essay is to recognize the importance of how beautiful you are: What nourishes a person's beauty is self-acceptance and love towards oneself.

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