

A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Gender Representation on Health and Fitness Magazine Cover Pages

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Abstract : In visual cultures, namely that of the United States, media representations are such influential and pervasive reflections of societal norms and expectations to the extent that they impact the manner in which both genders view themselves. Health and fitness magazines fall within the realm of visual culture. Since the main goal of communication is to ensure proper dissemination of information in order for the target audience to grasp the intended messages, it becomes imperative that magazine publishers, editors, advertisers and image producers use different modes of communication within their reach to convey messages to their readers and viewers. A rapid waxing flow of multimodality floods popular discourse, particularly health and fitness magazine cover pages. The use of well-crafted cover lines and visual images is imbued with agendas, consumerist ideologies and properties capable of effectively conveying implicit and explicit meaning to potential readers and viewers. In essence, the primary goal of this thesis is to interrogate the multi-semiotic operations and manifestations of hegemonic masculinity and femininity in male and female body culture, particularly on the cover pages of the twin American magazines Men's Health and Women's Health using corpora that spanned from 2011 to the mid of 2016. The researcher explores the semiotic resources that contribute to shaping and legitimizing a new form of postmodern, consumerist, gendered discourse that positions the reader-viewer ideologically. Methodologically, the researcher carries out analysis on the macro and micro levels. On the macro level, the researcher takes on a critical stance to illuminate the ideological nature of the multimodal ensemble of the cover pages, and, on the micro level, seeks to put forward new theoretical and methodological routes through which the semiotic choices well invested on the media texts can be more objectively scrutinized. On the macro level, a 'themes' analysis is initially conducted to isolate the overarching themes that dominate the fitness discourse on the cover pages under study. It is argued that variation in terms of frequencies of such themes is indicative, broadly speaking, of which facets of hegemonic masculinity and femininity are infused in the fitness discourse on the cover pages. On the micro level, this research work encompasses three sub-levels of analysis. The researcher follows an SF-MMDA approach, drawing on a trio of analytical frameworks: Halliday's SFG for the verbal analysis; Kress & van Leeuwen's VG for the visual analysis; and CMT in relation to Sperber & Wilson's RT for the pragma-cognitive analysis of multimodal metaphors and metonymies. The data is presented in terms of detailed descriptions in conjunction with frequency tables, ANOVA with $\alpha=0.05$ and MANOVA in the multiple phases of analysis. Insights and findings from this multi-faceted, social-semiotic analysis are interpreted in light of Cultivation Theory, Self-objectification Theory and the literature to date. Implications for future research include the implementation of a multi-dimensional approach whereby linguistic and visual analytical models are deployed with special regards to cultural variation.

Keywords : gender, hegemony, magazine cover page, multimodal discourse analysis, multimodal metaphor, multimodal metonymy, systemic functional grammar, visual grammar

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