



RESEARCH PAPER

A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Sunscreen Promotional Discourses on Social Media Platforms in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the sunscreen advertisement construct discourse of health, beauty and wellbeing on social media platforms through Multimodal strategies. Drawing on the theory of Social Semiotics and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis MCDA, this research investigates ten prominent sunscreen brands. This study employs a dual layered analytical framework, which uses salience along with its five principles as tool for visual analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2012). It further incorporates legitimation strategies of Van Leeuwen (authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation and mythopoesis (Leeuwen, 2007). The analysis focuses primary on three dimensions. Firstly, textual elements are analyzed through Van Leeuwen's legitimation strategies: authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation and mythopoesis. Secondly, visual elements are analyzed through the salience as a tool including its principles (color, size, focus, tone and foregrounding). Thirdly, it explains the combination of textual and visual elements within the advertisements to gain trust and credibility. This study aims to explore the sunscreen marketed on social media platforms construct message of health, beauty and wellbeing using these strategies. The findings of this study reveal that advertisers employ visual and textual strategies. To highlight products credibility and gain trust of consumers. This study concludes that sunscreen advertisements market in Pakistan construct message of health, beauty and wellbeing using design with scientific discourse and appealing lifestyle.

KEYWORDS Sunscreen Advertisements, Health, Wellbeing, SPF, FDA Guidelines for Sunscreen advertisement, MCDA, Legitimation Strategies

Introduction

In the modern digital world communication has evolved into a multimodal experience where visuals and text align to influence consumers perception. Sunscreen as an essential product for skin health to protect against UV radiation and multiple skin diseases, regulated by the FDA (FDA, 2019). Sunscreen is combined within the domain of both medical necessity and commercial lifestyle promotion. While regulatory bodies provide inflexible guidelines for safety and protective efficacy of SPF, advertisers strategically navigate these guidelines using intricate textual and visual approaches to establish trust and influence the consumers purchasing behavior. By integrating the moral appeal with scientific discourse, these advertisements operate beyond the product promotion, they contribute to the construction of dominant ideologies regarding beauty and health.

However, a gap is observed in understanding that how the product promotional advertisements are portrayed within a specific cultural context. The problem being explored in this study is that while marketing professionals are obliged by the safety regulations, they strategically use specific linguistic and visual techniques to legitimate their products, often creating overlap between beauty and health claims of the product. The main objectives of this analysis are to identify how textual and visual strategies are employed in the sunscreen advertisements on social media in Pakistan to legitimize the products and their promotional claims.

The research is significant due to its contribution to the academic discourse, marketing discourse, and consumer literacy. By applying Machin and Mayr's (Machin & Mayr, 2012) concepts of visual salience along Van Leeuwen's theory of legitimation (Leeuwen, 2007) This study provides a systematic framework to understand how marketing claims are made to feel trustworthy and credible.

Literature Review

The area of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) has led to a deeper understanding of how cosmetic industry blends visual and textual aspects to shape consumer perceptions and choices. A significant theme in recent MCDA researches is the scientification and ethical Framing of beauty and skincare products. For instance, (Hartono et al., 2022), analyzed how brands like Garnier utilizes scientific-sounding discourse and linguistic strategies to position consumers as empowered agents of change. In culturally specific context (Alifah & Hidayat, 2024) demonstrated how textual and visual elements in Wardah cosmetics advertisements work together to construct Islamic beauty ideals and cultural identity. As advertisements move across multiple media platforms, the meaning making strategies become more intricate, (Pricilia & Suyudi, 2023) explored the Garnier Sakura White advertising campaign showing how a sustainable semiotic system of linguistic and non-linguistic aspects ensure product promotion messages are effectively understood by mass audience.

Within Pakistani landscape, a comparative study of the transition of "Fair & Lovely" to "Glow and Lovely" revealed an ideological shift where rebranding was used to withdraw way from traditional colorism towards inclusive beauty standards (Bibi et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the medicalization of aging has become a significant discourse, as (Yasin & Sabir, 2026) highlighted that anti-aging advertisements significantly portray the natural process of aging as a "problem" requiring a scientific solution using high modality visual imagery and medical discourse to commercialize youth.

By reviewing these relevant studies, a distinct research gap is found, previous studies have focused on fairness, green marketing, and the medicalization of aging. However, there is limited of research on how specific discourse is used in sunscreen advertisements in Pakistan to legitimate their products. Sunscreen is unique because it bridges the gap between medical protection and cosmetic appeal. There is currently limited research of how certain words and specific terminologies are strategically placed in Pakistani social media sunscreen advertisements to justify the product's necessity and reinforce its health claims. This study will fill that gap by investigating the specific sunscreen advertisements on social media in Pakistan that portrays legitimation discourse on their advertisements.

Material and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the meaning and representations are created in sunscreen advertisements on social media in Pakistan. A qualitative research design is suitable because it focuses on the understanding of people to interpret social and cultural messages, and it allows the researcher to study data in its natural context while identifying patterns and themes (Creswell, 2014). This study is guided by Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), which helps in analyzing both visual and textual elements of advertisements.

The data collected for this study is collected from widely used social media platforms in Pakistan, such as Instagram and Facebook. These platforms are selected for their high engagement rates and visual nature, making them suitable for Multimodal Critical discourse Analysis. Advertisements will be chosen based on their use of both visual and textual strategies to communicate messages related to skin protection, beauty, and wellness.

This study employed a purposive sampling technique, a non-probability method suitable for qualitative research as it focuses on selecting information rich cases that provide deeper insights into the phenomenon under study (Suri, 2011). A total of 10 sunscreen advertisements from brands such as CERAVE, Dr Fazeela Abassi MINERAL TINTED SUNSCREEN, Neutrogena, LA Roche-Posay, Vince, Saeed Ghani, Rivaj UK, Merium Pervaiz Cosmetic, Organic travelers, NeXT on baby sunscreen. These advertisements are actively marketed targeting Pakistani audience, ensuring relevance to the study. Only advertisements published between January 2024 till present are included to reflect current trends and discourse. Advertisements containing the higher engagement measured through likes, are prioritized because of their influenced discourse. The data will be obtained through screenshots of the advertisement comprising the textual elements (brand slogans and word choices) and visual features (product placement, tone, size, color, foregrounding) for thorough analysis.

The theoretical framework of the analysis is based upon the social semiotics theory, introduced by M.A.K Halliday (Halliday, 1978) who argued that language should be understood within sociocultural context. It was further broadened by Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge (Hodge & Gunther, 1988) to incorporate signs and symbols beyond language emphasising Multimodal meaning making. Later, Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996), introduced visual grammar and multimodality, explaining how images and text work together, while David Machin and Andrea Mayr (Machin & Mayr, 2012) developed Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. It combines visual and textual analysis with a focus on power and ideology, showing how design choices and language in advertisements shape interpretation and reinforce dominant meanings.

Following the framework of David Machin and Andrea Mayr (Machin & Mayr, 2012) the analytical framework of this study uses Saliency and its elements such as (color, size, focus, tone and foregrounding) as a tool for visual analysis. It explains how certain aspects are made prominent and shape viewers perception about safety and trustworthiness of product use. For textual analysis, it applies legitimation strategies by Theo Van Leeuwen (Leeuwen, 2007) including authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis, which explains that ideas are presented as natural acceptable and justified. Together, this framework helps reveal sunscreen advertisements constructs meaning related to health and wellbeing while subtly

reinforcing power relations and underlying ideologies through both visual and textual strategies.

Results and Discussion

This section offers a qualitative analysis of ten sunscreen advertisements. The analysis is done at three levels. At first level, the textual analysis is done through legitimation strategies by Van Leeuwen (Leeuwen, 2007) including authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis. Secondly, the visual analysis is done using salience as tool along with its four principles (color, size, tone and foregrounding) as outlined by (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Thirdly, it shows that textual legitimacy is gained with the help of visuals.

In advertisement of Company A, Authoritative Legitimation is gained through expert authority. Mentioning of Skin Care Foundation seal and NEA (National Eczema Association). It makes rational claims regarding performance "SPF 50", "Broad Spectrum", "Oxybenzone Free" and Paraben Free". This Functions as instrumental rationalization. Third type of legitimacy is moral evaluation is gained through mentioning the chemicals that are still doubtful to use in formulation of sunscreen recommended by FDA. In fourth type of legitimacy mythopoesis creates a narrative of defense and trust.

Visually, in this advertisement orange grabs attention(sunlight), while blue and white build clinical trust. The size of the product is large and tube is placed central. Sharp lighting brings product details under focus. Minimalist tone signal professional efficiency. Diagonal placement of the tube in the foreground emphasizes it as a message carrier, while icons act as secondary support

The advertisement integrates visual and textual clues to establish scientific legitimacy. By balancing a bold color scheme with minimalist, clinical layout, the design ensures that the product is perceived as both consumer friendly and medically authoritative.

In advertisement of Company B, the brand mentions Dr. Fazeela Abbasi as brand name and "Beauty is Science" as brand slogan. It uses institutional authority. "SPF 50+" and Advanced Spectral Tech" refers to scientific rationalization. Moral Evaluation is gained by mentioning "Free of Chemicals". It appeals to ethical values and conscious consumerism. Inmythopoesis the narrative of protection and beauty is created through the beach setting and shield metaphor.

Visually, the advertisement uses white and blue color palate to evoke the sense of professionalism. The sharp focus and soft beach background direct attention to clinical details while evoking a calm, professional mood. The isolated upright positing creates intimacy and urgency presenting the tube as the lead message carrier.

The advertisement function as unified discourse. The clinical white design of the tube validates the "Advance Spectral Technology". By blurring the beach background, the advertisement transition from a general idealized lifestyle to a specific, scientifically grounded solution. It positions the product as both a moral choice and a medical necessity.

In advertisement of Company C, there is no direct mentioning of the authority. FDA approved ingredient (Titanium Dioxide) evoke a sense of expert legitimacy. This

advertisement uses scientific language like “SPF 40LPA+”, scientific diagram of “UVA and UVB” to gain instrumental logic. Moral evaluation is gain through the language “No white Residue”, “For all skin types’ connects the product to ethical standards of comfort, appearance and skin health. In mythopoesis the narrative of sunscreen as protective hero.

Blue/white conveys clinical trust. Orange creates a visual link to sun care and energy. The large, sharp focused tube is placed on the bottom left in the advertisement. The molecular motifs and hexagonal patterns create a scientific aesthetic that reinforces claims of high-tech dermatological research. The active shield graphics places the product in an active role, visually demonstrating its function as barrier

This sunscreen utilizes theoretical rationalization by addressing modern environmental threats such as blue light pollution. Visually the molecular motifs and hexagonal patterns work with the text to transform a simple cosmetic item into a scientifically engineered shield, aligning the brand with modern technological defense and clinical reliability.

The advertisement of Company D, the brand mentions traditional authority “Since 1888”. The mentioning of scientific ingredients Vitamin C build institutional trust. Rationalization is gained by using scientific terms such as SPF 60, “Water Resistant,” “Oil-Free” justify the products efficiency and utility. Moral Evaluation is gained by mentioning “Extra Whitening”, “For All skin types” appeals to cultural beauty ideals (purity and fairness) and moral good of health consciousness. In mythopoesis the beach setting constructs a narrative of reward, where the user enjoys sun drenched freedom through protection.

Yellow color in advertisement evokes sun energy. Blue provides a refreshing contrast. It gives contrast and visualize heat. The upright position of tube centers it as a message carrier.

This brand marketing integrates traditional authority with luxury lifestyle to gain credibility and trustworthiness.

In advertisement of Company E, brand centers on expert authorization, utilizing “No. 1 Dermatologist Recommended” status to build medical credibility. Rationalization strategy provided logical proof of efficacy through scientific terms like “100% Mineral Broad- Spectrum”. This clinical foundation is balanced by a moral and mythopoetic narrative is built through variety of sunscreen and parental responsibility, framing the “tear-free” product as an essential guardian for healthy childhood play.

Visually, the advertisement achieves salience through vibrant turquoise and yellow palette that blends clinical freshness and summery energy. By foregrounding the product array in sharp focus against a playful, tropical background. The friendly, family-oriented tone ensures the brand remains the central authority.

This brand marketing integrates expert authorization with family-oriented mythos, using vibrant, summer visuals to frame scientific mineral protection as an essential tool for responsible parenting. The clinical clarity of branding is softened by a playful palette, positioned the brand as medically superior choice and a child friendly summer staple.

In advertisement of Company F, brand mentions “Aqua fluid”, Photoderm MAX shows brand expertise and technical naming to imply scientific innovation. “SPF 50+” and “Optimal Health” reinforce instrumental rationalization. The text employs moral evaluation and mythopoesis by framing the product as a “Skin Guardian”.

The advertisement achieves maximum salience by centering the tube within a glowing aura, ensuring the “Aqua fluid” innovation is foregrounded as the primary solution for health-conscious consumers.

This advertisement employs a mythopoetic strategy by personifying the product as a “Skin Guardian,” visually reinforced through a radiant golden halo that suggests the tube itself radiates protective energy. This moral appeal to self-care is grounded in scientific rationalization (SPF 50+), creating a multimodal discourse where the product as a scientific necessity and a symbolic shield against environmental vulnerability.

In advertisement of Company G, the brand establishes institutional authority by mentioning “Laboratoire Dermatologique”. SPF 50+/ and invisible fluid give rationalization. Moral evaluation transforms sun protection into a social responsibility and ethical duty towards health. Water splash and flawless model creates a narrative of protection and beauty.

Visually, the use of blue, orange and white color palette creates a sense of professionalism. The advertisement uses facial salience to show clear skin as a result of product use. The dynamic water splash act as visual proof of the “Ultra resistant claim, keeping the products function at the forefront.

The advertisement merges institutional authority with mythopoetic narrative. The brand marketing establishesscientific trust and frames protection as moral responsibility.

In advertisement of Company H, the brand uses role model authority followed by millions of people. The advertisement applies theoretical rationalisation by referring to all seasons, while the expression “every day” represents regular skin protection as a necessity.

Visually, the orange monochromatic background represents a sense of energy and urgency while enhancing the contrast of white informational icons. The diagonal placement of the tube represents action and readiness while the central positioning of the weather icons on the tube emphasises the protective message of “all weathers”.

This advertisement leans in rationalization and moral evaluation, transforming the sunscreen from a seasonal luxury into a daily health essential. The diagonal placement of the tube suggests readiness and motion, reinforcing the narrative that the costumer should be proactive in their self-care regardless of weather conditions.

In advertisement of Company I, brand uses role model authority to demonstrate peer led trust. It combines instrumental logic (utility for sensitive skin) with economic rationalization (price reduction). Moral evaluation is achieved by mentioning it as a protector of “Sensitive skin”. Price friendly narrative is built by mentioning before and after price.

Visually, gold, yellow and pink against white background creates a fresh tone. Large “GLOW SPF” establishes brand identity as the primary focus while highlighting

specific benefits through circular icons. Price drop places consumer value at the forefront, ensuring these are the first points of engagement.

This advertisement shifts from traditional institutional authority to role model authorization, utilizing a relatable influencer to establish trust. By foregrounding the “No white cast” claim and the “FLAT 15% OFF” tag, the design successfully targets the practical and ethical concerns of Pakistani market.

In advertisement of Company J, no direct mentioning of authority. Uses technical language to establish scientific credibility. Employs instrumental rationalization by highlighting the products dual-purpose utility and practical benefits. “Bye Sunburn, Hello Adventure” frames the product as a tool for responsible parenting, linking sun protection to moral duty of ensuring a child’s safety. Beach Imagery & clean skin constructs a narrative of perfect summer, where the sunscreen acts as a ticket to worry-free outdoor play.

Visually, the advertisement uses yellow, blue and orange color palate adding a playful, energetic spark suitable for kids. The centered, oversized bottle establishes the product as a protective figure. The cheerful and Child friendly tone balances joy with protection. The sand-based placement symbolizes real world durability.

This brand uses mythopoetic storytelling with technical rationalization. By utilizing a “Bye Sunburn, Hello Adventure” tagline alongside scientific claims like “SPF 50+”, the advertisement speaks to a parent’s dual desire for their child’s happiness and health. Visually, the vibrant, high salience yellow bottle dominates the frame, serving as a symbolic “guardian against the background beach elements.

The following section of the study addresses the discussion based on the analysis of ten selected sunscreen advertisements.

Advertisement is the most essential tool for the promotion of sunscreen products (Khan, 2022). Strong visual contrast is employed in the advertisements using colors (orange, yellow, blue, white, turquoise, pink, purple, golden) to attract the attention of audiences. White represents clinical safety and purity whereas orange, golden, and yellow conveyed sunlight, warmth and vitality (Aslam, 2006). The diverse choice of colors enhanced visual appeal and a theme of care and protection was associated with it, consequently strengthening the promotional message.

The sunscreen product placement in all the sunscreen advertisements were consistently positioned as the central focus of the advertisement. The composition drew the attention of viewers directly towards the product and reinforced prominence (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

The advertisement places a strong visual focus on the tube and textual details of the product while the elements in the background such as blue skies, sand and beach remain intentionally blurred to reflect the context of use of the product. This contrast enhances clarity and gives the advertisement a sense of professionalism and product authority. A clean, calm and professional tone was created through the use of minimalist design, soft lightening and natural setting. These choices helped build an emotional connection with viewers and presented the product as trust worthy. Sunscreen products are visually foregrounded against less prominent backgrounds. This direct placement created a sense of real-life interaction and reinforced the product as the central carrier of

the message. Some advertisements refer to authority either by mentioning institutions or by mentioning role model, expert or traditional authority to legitimize the product use and effectiveness.

The authorization strategy typically involves referring to an external authority (Leeuwen, 2007). In advertisement of Company A, the advertisers directly mention "Recommended by the Skin Cancer Foundation for Daily use". Skin Cancer foundation serves as an idea of powerful international authority which legitimize its use by recommending it as it prevents deadliest skin disease. In advertisement of Company B, the expert authority is mentioned, the placement of DFA at the top of the advertisement reinforce the expert authority. Dr Fazeela Abassi is recognized as Pakistan's most competent dermatologist throughout the world, which serves as ideological purpose of purchasing and buying this product. In advertisement of Company C, the mentioning of traditional authority by stating "Since 1988" making it eye catching for the viewers who avoid chemicals and prefer using traditional skin care products. In advertisement of Company G, the use of "Laboratoire Dermatologique" mentioned in French language serves as eye catching. The brand indirectly mentions its origin as high-end international product, which can be serves as ideology for viewers to consider its effectiveness. In advertisement of Company I, the endorsement of Merium Pervaiz, a Pakistani social media skin care influencer with 1Million followers on Instagram, is shown holding the sunscreen. This imply role model authority where she being a skin care influencer show herself using this sunscreen. This legitimizes the product use with other factors mentioned on the advertisement. In advertisement of Company H, the name of the brand legitimizes the product authority. Due to the merium Pervaiz acting as role model and social influencer viewers trust the effectiveness of product. By using these authorities' sunscreen brands position themselves and their products trustworthy to use.

Some advertisements use Scientific phrases, such as "SPF 50", "Broad Spectrum", "Free of Chemicals", "Titanium Dioxide", "Oxybenzone Free" and "Ultra- Resistant". Titanium Dioxide is one of the active ingredients to be used in sunscreen because of its protecting properties as approved by FDA (FDA, 2019). "SPF 50" is approved SPF standard by (FDA, 2019). SPF below this range is not effective for use. Mention of "Oxybenzone Free" by Cera Ve sunscreen, is one of the thirteen ingredients, that FDA mention as doubtful to be used in sunscreen as active ingredients because of the lack of scientific data. This reflects the instrumental rationalization used by the brands in their advertisement techniques where technical sounding claims creates scientific validation for product use (Leeuwen, 2007).

In some advertisements, the mentioning of wrinkle free skin, anti-dark spots, anti-darkening reflects the cultural beauty standards with skin protection. The advertisement suggests the ideological view of society which admires clear and spotless skin (Saeed & Khan, 2022). Thus, the power of advertisement misleads the consumers into believing that everything mentioned is true.

According to (Vaara et al., 2006), elements may include dramatic narrative in which actors can be described as winners, losers, heroes. They state that mythopoesis may be based either on moral or cautionary stories depict what happens if social standards are not followed. All the sunscreen brand advertisements construct moral story narratives by directly featuring the sunscreen as skin protector supported by visual background. Outdoor sunny beach or clear skies setting in almost all ten sunscreen brand advertisements implies that using sunscreen leads to enjoyment, beauty and safety. The narrative of satisfaction through saving and usage have been proven.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to assess the concept of health, well-being and beauty through the use of linguistic and visual strategies in the chosen sunscreen advertisements. The findings have been discussed through the lens of legitimation strategies authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, mythopoesis is operated through visual salience (color, size, tone, placement and foregrounding). The result of this study suggests that sunscreen advertising not only promotes skincare also contributes to the construction of broader ideological narratives surrounding health, beauty and lifestyle. This highlights a significant link between cosmetic culture and medical discourse where protection from environmental harm is connected with idealised beauty standards. Furthermore, the findings emphasize how advertising plays an essential role in influencing consumer beliefs. It emphasizes the importance of media literacy. Therefore, these findings underscore the need of marketing strategies studies under the lens of MCDA.

Recommendations

This study recommends the expansion of future research to a broader range of sunscreen advertisements across different social media platforms to understand the multimodal strategies in more detail. Comparative research can be conducted between international and local brands. It also suggests that the response of the consumers to be evaluated that how they interpret the textual and visual claims on sunscreen advertisements. Regulatory bodies are recommended to strengthen advertising guidelines digitally for a clear distinction between beauty and health related discourse. Consumers should check regulatory bodies such as Food and Drug Administration guidelines before consuming the product. Advertisers are advised to ensure transparency in presenting the information about products and marking a clear difference between skincare and beauty.

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